

# How to Powerfully Describe Emotions in Writing

Three strategies from famous writers that will help you connect with readers

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You've probably heard the writing rule "show, don't tell" a thousand times. It's especially important to follow when you're trying to vividly describe the emotions of a character in a story or your own emotions in a blog post.

Don't just tell your reader that you or your character was angry or sad or exhausted. Those words keep your reader at arm's length and don't allow them to become fully immersed in the story and truly understand what your characters are feeling.

Instead, you want to *show* your readers these emotions so your readers experience them as well, and you touch their hearts with your words.

In today's blog post, I'm sharing three strategies that will help you powerfully evoke emotions so that your writing resonates with readers. We'll look at these strategies in action in the writing of F. Scott Fitzgerald, J. R. R. Tolkien, and more.

Let's dive in.

*(This is a blog post version of a YouTube video I made that [you can watch below](#) if you prefer watching to reading). :)*

## **1. Describe the Scene to an Outside Observer**

The first strategy is to describe what is happening in the scene you are writing. Think about your reader as a fly on the wall. What would they see as an outside observer?

This mimics real life where you wouldn't have a narrator appear in front of you and say, "This person here is angry," but you would have to come to that conclusion yourself by that person's words or actions or the expression on that person's face.

What does your character say out loud? How can you use that dialogue to convey the emotions they are experiencing? What does the character's voice sound like? Does it quiver or become louder or softer? What does their face look like? Is their forehead furrowed? Or are their teeth clenched, their eyes flashing?

If a character says, "Don't talk to me about this anymore," and they storm out of a room, slamming the door behind them, we obviously can come to the conclusion that the character is angry. This is far more entertaining for your readers since it makes us feel like we are right there in the room with your characters.

Here's an example of this strategy in *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald:

*"Please don't." Her voice was cold, but the rancour was gone from it. She looked at Gatsby. "There, Jay," she said — but her hand as she tried to light a cigarette was trembling. Suddenly she threw the cigarette and the burning match on the carpet.*

In this quote, you can see that Fitzgerald doesn't *tell* us that this character, Daisy, is upset or nervous or sad, but he is able to *show* us the emotions of the character through dialogue. Daisy is hardly able to speak. Then she tries to light a cigarette, but her hand is trembling so much that she just throws it away.

From these little actions and from the dialogue (Fitzgerald also describes the tone of Daisy's voice), we are able to deduce the emotional state of this character.

## 2. Describe What the Character Physically Feels

The second strategy that you can use to powerfully convey emotions is to describe what your characters are physically feeling.

A quick note with this strategy: you can only use it for your point of view character unless you have an omniscient narrator who is able to know what multiple characters are feeling.

But, for example, if you're writing a short story in the first person, you would only be able to describe what your main character is physically feeling, not the other characters in the story (unless your protagonist is a mind reader). Just like in real life, you don't know if someone else has a headache unless they tell you.

**Here's how you can use this strategy for your point of view characters:**

Think about the emotion the character is experiencing and how that affects their five senses: touch, taste, smell, sight, and hearing. If the character is nervous, you might write that the character's mouth grows dry or maybe their palms are sweaty or their head is throbbing.

These details help your reader share the emotion of your character.

Here's an example of this strategy in action in the Pulitzer prize-winning novel *So Big* by Edna Ferber:

*But once in the vast bed she lay there utterly lost in the waves of terror and loneliness that envelop one at night in a strange house amongst strange people. She lay there, tensed and tight, her toes curled with nervousness, her spine hunched with it, her leg muscles taut.*

Notice in this quote that Ferber does use the word "nervousness". Words like this aren't off-limits, but you want to make sure you take them to the next level and add more description behind them so we can truly experience what your character is feeling.

When I use this strategy, if I'm writing fiction, I like to think about whether I have ever been in a situation that was similar to my characters. How did I react in that situation? What did it feel like that? How did it affect me physically?

So put yourself in the head of your characters and consider how you can make your reader feel like they are the character, viscerally sharing his or her emotions.

### **3. Evoke Emotion with Similes and Metaphors**

The third strategy is to use similes and metaphors to describe your characters' emotions.

With a simile, you use the words "like or as" to compare two things to each other, and with a metaphor, you compare two things without those words.

Here is an example from J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Fellowship of the Ring*.

*"I am old, Gandalf. I don't look it, but I am beginning to feel it in my heart of hearts. Well-preserved indeed!" he snorted. "Why, I feel all thin, sort of stretched, if you know what I mean: like butter that has been scraped over too much bread. That can't be right. I need a change, or something."*

In this quote, Tolkien uses a simile ("like butter that has been scraped over too much bread") to describe how Bilbo feels old and worn out. This technique adds another level of imagery to Tolkien's writing and helps us to connect with Bilbo on a deeper level.

Even though there's more going on in the story here (Bilbo is in possession of a magic ring), we can all identify with Bilbo and say, "I've felt like that too!" It also makes the writing memorable since this simile might get stuck in our heads, and the next time we're feeling exhausted, we might quote this line from the book.

Here's another example of this strategy, this time a metaphor, from Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*:

*They came to her, naturally, since she was a woman, all day long with this and that; one wanting this, another that; the children were growing up; she often felt she was nothing but a sponge sopped full of human emotions.*

When I read this metaphor for the first time ("she was nothing but a sponge"), I pictured somebody ringing out a sponge, the water soaking their hands. It brings another dimension to the description and helps readers empathize with the character. You've probably been in a similar situation where you too have felt overwhelmed, a sponge sopped full.

## The Takeaway

When you're able to powerfully convey emotions in your writing, your stories

becomes more compelling. Readers better identify with the main characters and want to continue reading to discover what's going to happen to them.

In the characters, readers see reflections of their own souls, their own deepest emotions that they did not realize anyone else shared.

Ann Lamott observes,

*Writing and reading decrease our sense of isolation. They deepen and widen and expand our sense of life: they feed the soul. When writers make us shake our heads with the exactness of their prose and their truths, and even make us laugh about ourselves or life, our buoyancy is restored. We are given a shot at dancing with, or at least clapping along with, the absurdity of life, instead of being squashed by it over and over again. It's like singing on a boat during a terrible storm at sea. You can't stop the raging storm, but singing can change the hearts and spirits of the people who are together on that ship.*

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